Lateral

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Introduction: US Gun Culture and the Performance of Racial Sovereignty

by Lindsay Livingston and Alex Trimble Young | Gun Culture, Issue 9.1 (Spring 2020)

ABSTRACT This introduction examines gun culture in the United States and argues that it is a product of the longstanding practices of settler colonialism, anti-Blackness, and misogyny that have shaped life in the United States. Invoking an anthropological definition of culture, it argues that gun violence is a central facet of US political and social life and that performances of gun use and ownership, particularly when enacted by white men, embody a kind of "racial sovereignty," or a violent limitation of the practical applicability of citizenship to those who promulgate whiteness, maleness, and violence as primary markers of full belonging in the civic community.

KEYWORDS anti-Blackness, gun culture, performance, settler colonialism, sovereignty, United States

At around 10:20 a.m. on August 3, 2019, Patrick Crusius walked into a Walmart in El Paso, Texas armed with a WASR-10 rifle (a semi-automatic version of an AK-47) and wearing noise-suppressing headphones to protect his hearing. He had driven over 600 miles from his home in Allen, Texas, with a single goal in mind: to kill Mexicans. Minutes before he began shooting, Crusius had posted a chilling white supremacist manifesto to the website 8-Chan. In it, he ranted about a "Hispanic invasion of Texas" and claimed that the only solution to this perceived affront was to "get rid of enough people."[1] After killing twenty-two people and injuring twenty-five others, Crusius drove to a nearby intersection, climbed out of his car with his hands up, identified himself as the shooter to police, and surrendered.[2]

In the familiar public outrage that followed this act of racial terror, there was a strange consensus that emerged across conservative and liberal responses in the media. While the shooter and his ideology should be condemned, these responses argued, there exists a "gun culture" that must be respected, in spite of its potential contribution to such repeated events of spectacular firearm violence. In a feature on the response to the shooting, *The Guardian* concludes that the shooting was "unlikely to dent [the] state's gun culture" and quotes a Houston-area gun enthusiast's response to the tragedy: "'We are Texas,' he claims, 'because of guns.'"[3] Covering country singer Kacey Musgraves' call for gun control after the shooting, the *Washington Post* writes that "[Musgraves] pointed out that she hailed from Texas and was familiar with hunting and gun culture."[4] In an op-ed for *Politico* entitled "What Both Sides Don't Get about American Gun Culture," political scientist Jonathan Obert and legal scholar Austin Sarat call firearms a "social glue" and warn gun reformers not to push too hard against gun owners, whose investment in that ownership amounts to a group identity. Obert and Sarat continue:

> Gun owners need assurance that liberal gun reform advocates will not march down a slippery slope from red-flag laws, regulating semi-automatic weapons and large capacity magazines and closing the gun-show loophole to intrusive regulations that start to break down a culture that millions of people value greatly—one that enriches their lives and whose roots go back before America's founding.[5]

In these varied examples, the "culture" in gun culture is understood in the anthropological sense, a complex whole constitutive of an entire political and social reality and its attendant collective identity ("We are Texas because of guns"). For opponents of gun reform, this understanding of gun culture stands as a straightforward justification for resistance to gun regulation. For gun reform advocates, it stands as a piety that must be observed to underscore the moderation of their reformist agenda. But what is this culture that has come to be seen as inviolable by both sides of the gun debate?

The phrase "gun culture" yokes a broad category of technology to one of the most notoriously multivalent keywords in humanistic thought. As a result, it has the potential to describe a wildly heterogenous set of phenomena. Indeed, as sociologist David Yamane has argued, it is perhaps futile to lump practices ranging from duck hunting to doomsday prepping to Black self-defense collectives under the singular category of gun culture.[6] Wary of this potential flattening effect of describing all gun use in the United States as a singular "culture," many scholars instead focus on specific historical moments, discrete communities, or precise physical rituals associated with gun culture. These studies resist drawing broad conclusions about a pervasive gun culture and instead make narrowly circumscribed claims.[7] Another influential branch of gun studies examines "the vital agency in the gun itself" and often eschews the concept of a "gun culture" altogether.[8] This materialist analysis, arguably inaugurated by Bruno Latour's "On Technical Mediation," in which he ruminates on the NRA's infamous "guns don't kill people, people kill people" slogan, centers the gun as an object that is fundamentally different from other objects in the way it impacts human behavior.[9]

Nonetheless, as the responses to the mass shooting in El Paso demonstrate, when "the gun" is invoked as a problem in the United States, a singular "gun culture" surely follows. Rather than dismiss this usage as a misapprehension, we argue that it in fact describes a hegemonic gun culture—culture here conceived in the anthropological sense outlined above—that has enabled the normative political, juridical, and social contexts in which the widespread circulation of privately owned firearms renders the proliferation of gun "cultures" possible.[10] The essays in this forum examine specific case studies and foundational political concepts as a means to understand this hegemonic gun culture, its historical continuities and transformations, the identities and behaviors it produces, and its relationship to broader structures of racial and colonial violence. Though the United States can be described as containing a plurality of gun culture(s) rather than a singular expression of gun affinity, a continued critique of this normative gun culture is nevertheless necessary.[11]

This forum examines how this normative gun culture has been shaped by long histories of settler colonialism and chattel slavery, producing ongoing cycles of violence that harm all Americans but have disproportionate impacts on Indigenous and Black people. We examine how ideologies of white supremacy and their reliance on both legal and extralegal violence have produced the United States' exceptionally toxic gun culture. This culture's entrenched nature makes it impossible to produce meaningful public policy solutions that curtail the everyday gun violence committed with firearms without first confronting the

racist and misogynist legacies that underpin firearm use. Gun culture in the United States, as these essays demonstrate, exists within "the total climate" of anti-Blackness. This, coupled with the continuing effects of settler colonialism means that the proliferation and excessive use of firearms in the US creates a culture in which "the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death" can be carried out by anyone with access to a gun.[12] We analyze how performances of gun use and ownership, particularly when enacted by white men, embody a kind of "racial sovereignty," or a violent limitation of the practical applicability of citizenship to those who promulgate whiteness, maleness, and violence as primary markers of full belonging in the civic community.[13]

The gun emerges as an agent in public discourse in a relatively circumscribed set of circumstances. Following a particular kind of public mass shooting—generally committed by a (white) man, in a neutral public place, and targeting people unknown to the shooter—there is a broad outcry about "the gun," met with an equally vociferous redirection onto "the shooter." Talk of banning certain firearms is met with rebuttals that emphasize the mental or moral capacity of the perpetrator of the mass shooting. Arguments that "guns kill" inspire the retort that "guns don't kill, people do." And yet, only one percent of firearm deaths are the result of a public mass shooting.[14] The spectacular nature of these events, however, has catalyzed a national conversation about the distinct gun culture that produces them, while at the same time eliding the everyday violence that many Americans, particularly those in segregated and underserved communities, live with. The elisions themselves are telling. The gun rarely enters the public consciousness as an object with agency in relation to the imperial violence of the US military operating around the world, or in response to police shooting an unarmed Black man, or in cases of domestic or workplace violence. The spectacular public mass shooting thus becomes a metonym for the multiple kinds of gun violence that Americans live with daily. But emphasizing the individual shooter's motivation and the individual gun's technical capacity obfuscates the political and ideological dimensions of this violence. Almost always, mass public shooters in the United States are white and male. These "exceptional citizens," as Inderpal Grewal calls them, enact spectacular violence upon a crowd in a public space as a means to assert their sovereignty over the public sphere.[15]

The shooter as exceptional citizen is a white man who is the inheritor of the structural outcomes of anti-Black and anti-Indigenous gun violence practiced on behalf of genocidal frontier conquest and brutal chattel slavery. The right to bear arms enshrined in the US Constitution remains a right conditioned, in deed if not in word, by the bearer's proximity to whiteness. The sovereign violence performed by the public mass shooter enabled by that right and fetishized in the object of the gun is the expression of a *racial* sovereignty. If the United States *is* a gun culture, then mass shootings are but one manifestation of that culture, and a very small one at that. They are, nevertheless, representative of some of the core issues at stake in negotiating that culture. Mass shootings command so much attention because they are performative acts that dramatize outstanding and unresolved questions about the nature of sovereign power in the United States. The mass shooter is a man who flaunts his power to decide "who may live and who must die" over a population.[16]

Understanding the gun less as an agential object than as one that grants necropolitical power to those who wield it can illuminate the discrepant responses that US gun violence engenders. Because the issues of sovereignty and masculinity that drive mass shooters are so clearly bound up in the United States' long-time enmeshment with white supremacy, white male shooters are often positioned as individualistic and agential, but

suffering—whether it be from mental illness, video games, or the gun itself, which imposes its power upon him. Nearly every explanation of mass shootings undertaken by white perpetrators elides the political and ideological dimensions of this violence. In the case of mass shootings perpetrated by individuals who are not white, however, agency is often attributed to broad political forces perceived as exogenous to normative US culture. For example, in the San Bernardino and Pulse Nightclub shootings, the shooters' putative ties to ISIS quickly eclipsed questions about their relation to "gun culture" in the public imagination.[17]

The impasse at which the nation inevitably arrives following these events hinges on a disagreement regarding how the command of violence should be reconfigured among US citizens. The conservative right argues that the democratic distribution of necropolitical power is necessary for citizens to protect themselves not only from private violence and other forms of crime but also from the power of a potentially tyrannical state. Both these claims are self-evidently fantasies. In the first instance, studies have shown over and over that a gun in the home is more likely to be used against a member of the household itself than in the prevention of crime; in the second, the superior firepower held by the state will inevitably outstrip that held by individual citizens.[18] In contesting these positions, the liberal left has focused almost exclusively on the gun as an object rather than on an effort to understand the affective dimensions of this fantasy as such. This focus has manifested in an emphasis on regulating the gun as technology rather than interrogating how the gun as symbol continues to mobilize an ideological community that has rendered that regulation almost impossible.

The essays in this forum confront this aporia by foregrounding the "culture" side of the ubiquitous yet undertheorized "gun culture" formulation. Including but not limited to the analysis of cultural production as such, each in its own way explores how hegemonic gun culture continues to shape political subjectivities and juridical structures around a violent conception of racial sovereignty. By invoking an anthropological conception of culture that reads gun violence as a central facet of political and social life in the United States, these essays suggest that addressing our national epidemic of gun violence may require a fundamental "revolution of values" rather than technocratic reforms.[19]

This assertion invites us to return to the essay that brought the term "gun culture" into widespread use, Richard Hofstadter's 1970 "The United States as a Gun Culture."[20] By 1970, many dimensions of our contemporary gun crisis were already evident: increasing numbers of US Americans had collected military-grade arms as they flooded the market following the end of World War II; gun deaths in the US—from murder, suicide, and accidental fire—far outpaced those in peer nations; and the number of people killed by gun violence in the twentieth century thus far was larger than the total number of US soldiers who had been killed in battle—in all wars combined. Emphasizing the culpability of the trigger-puller as well as the shocking proliferation of firearms, Hofstadter argues that the United States' gun culture privileges "assassins, professional criminals, berserk murderers, and political terrorists at the expense of the orderly population," threatening to rend the civic fabric of the nation. He closes his essay railing against the seeming impossibility to affect meaningful political action in response:

> A nation that could not devise a system of gun control after its experiences of the 1960's, and at a moment of profound popular revulsion against guns, is not likely to get such a system in the calculable future. One must wonder how grave a domestic gun catastrophe would have to be in order to persuade us. How far must things go?

If Hofstadter's analysis of gun violence in his moment echoes disquietingly with our own, so too does his analysis of the culture that enables it. While his essay betrays many of the myopias of white liberals of his time—he imperiously dismisses Susan Sontag's description of settler conquest as "genocide," to give but one example—he nonetheless locates the origins of US gun culture in the violence of the settler frontier and the slave patrols. He argues that the culture that emerged from these founding moments of racialized violence, tempered by a long English tradition of mistrust for militarized state power, was one whose "answer to civic and military decadence, real or imagined, was the armed yeoman." For Hofstadter it is this figure, having outlived the conditions of his origins yet essential to white American men's conception of their own masculine autonomy, that subtends gun violence. In his conclusion, Hofstadter notes with some anxiety—indeed, quite possibly the anxiety that spurred him to write the piece—that this tendency bridges traditional right and left divides, and that "militant young blacks [are] borrowing the white man's mystique and accepting the gun as their instrument."[21]

While Hofstadter was penning "America as a Gun Culture," Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz was one of the armed radical leftists that he decries. In her influential 2018 book *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment*, Dunbar-Ortiz repudiates armed resistance as a tactic while maintaining her commitment to revolutionary politics.[22] In her wide-ranging critique, she targets both gun culture and liberal scholarship that she reads as obfuscating the Second Amendment's roots in racial violence. She offers Hofstadter qualified praise for recognizing "the historical roots that might explain the violence wrought by civilian gun use" even as she critiques him for not establishing a causal link between this violence and the inclusion of the Second Amendment in the Bill of Rights.[23] Dunbar-Ortiz links gun culture to the foundational violence of the frontier and slave patrols, but argues that the private ownership of firearms is not an embarrassing relic of a bygone era but rather a crucial means of bolstering ongoing racial and colonial domination. Nonetheless, like Hofstadter, she calls attention to the ways in which cultural representation both subtends and is enabled by these structures of violence. While her critique lacks any of the racial anxiety that arguably colors Hofstadter's, she too sees a distinct danger in armed leftist militancy becoming ensnared in what she calls "gun love." In describing her own period of armed militancy, she describes her feminist collective arming themselves and in the process succumbing to a "passion that was inappropriate to our political objectives, and [that] ended up distorting and determining them."[24]

The erotically charged language ("love" "passion") that Dunbar-Ortiz employs here gives voice to an understanding of the gun as an object that functions as a strange kind of fetish. Despite the historical and ideological gulf that separates them, this is an approach that Dunbar-Ortiz and Hofstadter could be said to share. While Hofstadter rejects a rote Freudian reading of the gun's status as a phallic object, Hofstadter's gun, like Marx's commodity, is an object only made legible through a consideration of the violent intersubjective relationships that subtend its circulation. Like Freud's fetish, Dunbar-Ortiz's gun is cathected with an affective power that draws individuals into those relationships even as they attempt to resist them.

The essays in this forum explore the relationships of domination that the gun fetishizes, and in so doing attempt to render legible the tangle of everyday actions, postures, and ideologies that support and promote the proliferation of guns and gun violence in US life. The first essay, "The Self-Defeating Notion of the Sovereign Subject in US Gun Culture" < https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/self-defeating-notion-sovereign-subject-kautzer/> by Chad Kautzer, examines how doctrines of popular sovereignty and the

sovereign subject have both upheld white supremacy throughout US history and continue to influence contemporary gun culture rhetorics and attitudes, in spite of the fact that the very concept of a "sovereign subject" is unrealizable. Kautzer argues that the employment of popular sovereignty systematizes unequal social relationships via the use of extralegal violence, which in turn establishes the precedent that enables the codification of those unequal relationships in law. Kautzer then asserts that the concept of the sovereign subject—a concept that underpins much of contemporary gun culture—is fundamentally contradictory and "self-defeating." Indeed, Kautzer argues, in claiming the right to exert lethal power over others at any given moment, gun owners decrease their own personal freedom by unraveling the social agreements that in fact reduce their (and others') injurability. Kautzer's observation that no event of gun violence could convince "aspiring sovereign subjects" to give up their right to use a firearm to impose their will on others emphasizes that the culture produced by widespread gun proliferation is a fractured, atomized one that is ultimately incapable of putting the needs of the many to survive and thrive ahead of the desire of a few to ensure their total individual invulnerability.

Caroline Light's contribution, "On Civil Rights, Armed Citizens®, and Historical Overdose," < https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/on-civil-rights-armed-citizens-and-historical-overdose-light/> takes a historical view of the National Rifle Association's claim that they are "America's longest-standing civil rights organization."[25] Light situates the NRA's false assertion within the history of Black armed community defense and, in so doing, demonstrates how this appropriation of the legacy of anti-racist activism serves to reassert social dynamics that privilege white, male gun owners while increasing the precarity of already vulnerable communities, particularly those that are overcriminalized and underserved by the state. Claims like the NRA's, which try to whitewash history and insist that the right to bear arms is, in fact, applied in a "colorblind" manner, selectively use history to occlude the racist origins and effects of gun rights laws and their application. Drawing on Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Light describes this co-option of Civil Rights legacies as an example of "historical overdose," a scenario in which people become "complaisant hostages of the pasts they create."[26] Light warns of the danger in seeing gun culture as simply an absolutist version of sovereign armed citizenship and insists that we recognize the racialized processes that underpin *both* gun rights and gun control efforts—the anti-Blackness at the heart of normative US gun culture.

"The Necropolitics of Liberty: Sovereignty, Fantasy, and United States Gun Culture," < https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/necropolitics-of-liberty-sovereignty-fantasy-us-gun-culture-young/> by Alex Trimble Young, finds in the survivalist novels of the paramilitary right an archive that reveals the uncomfortable proximity of the speculative fictions of that subculture to more mainstream narratives. In a reading of the novel *Only By Blood and Suffering* by LaVoy Finicum, the militant killed during the armed occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, Young argues that Finicum's allegory of a post-apocalyptic restoration of settler sovereignty cannot be understood as one exogenous to the fantasies that undergird the constituted power of the United States. Reading contemporary liberal rhetoric against Finicum's ideologically charged novel, Young argues that neither conservative nor liberal rhetoric challenges the notion that gun violence played a salutary role on the settler colonial frontier, which both sides understand as a site productive of democratic values. This affirmation of the frontier past allows the survivalist novel to unapologetically project "the law-making violence of the frontier . . . into the future as fantasy" whereas it leaves liberals with a contradictory orientation toward that history wherein "the disavowal of settler colonial violence is paired with an often barely sublimated desire for its return." This contradiction in liberal ideology is

symptomatic, Young argues, of a refusal to recognize the need for a radical break from the material and symbolic underpinnings of white settler colonialism that would be necessary to overcome the ongoing structures of violence that govern life in the United States. By recognizing the elements of classical liberal ideology at the heart of Finicum's survivalist novel, Young suggests, we can begin to understand the radical orientation necessary to contest his politics.

Finally, Lindsay Livingston's "Good [Black] Guys With Guns" <https://csalateral.org/forum/gun-culture/good-black-guys-with-guns-livingston/> explores how embodied performances inform the necropolitical decisions made by police officers during encounters with armed suspects. Livingston examines the case of E.J. Bradford, a concealed carry permit holder who was shot and killed by police while he was attempting an armed intervention against a potential mass shooter in an Alabama mall in 2018. In so doing, she interrogates "one of the primary modalities of contemporary gun culture," the notion that there is a stable division between "good guys with guns" and "bad guys with guns." Livingston argues that, in moments of police encounter with armed citizens, this supposedly "ontological binary," much like the friend/enemy distinction that Carl Schmitt conceptualized as foundational to political community, is shaped not by the law but by an individual's decision.[27] Analyzing the Attorney General's report that exonerated the anonymous police officer who killed Bradford, Livingston finds not an objective standard of "reasonableness" that guides the officer's decision, but rather a legal aporia that left the officer to rely on broader cultural scripts to guide his actions. Embodied police behavior in such instances stands as an example of "restored behavior," Livingston argues, performances that are not just rehearsed "through formalized training of [officer's] bodies," but are "scripted by centuries of racialized thinking." Livingston demonstrates how such scripts become embedded in legal standards themselves by showing how, in the Bradford case, the Attorney General's test of "reasonableness" falls back on the question of what other law enforcement officers would have done in the same situation, creating a self-reinforcing tautology that bolsters racialized scripts for armed performance even as it purports to see beyond them.

By reading the rhetoric and performances that shape twenty-first-century gun culture in the United States in the context of the *longue durée* of racial and colonial violence in North America, this forum seeks to reframe the public conversation about gun culture and shift the discussion away from its focus on right/left political distinctions and debates about the relationship between popular sovereignty and the liberal state. By foregrounding the ongoing role that anti-Blackness and settler colonialism play in shaping United States gun culture, we hope to illuminate how state and private gun violence in the United States can only be contested by confronting these ongoing structures of violence.

Notes

1. Tim Arango, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, and Katie Benner, "Minutes Before El Paso Killing, Hate-Filled Manifesto Appears Online," *New York Times*, August 3, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/us/patrick-crusius-el-paso-shooter-manifesto.html <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/03/us/patrick-crusius-el-paso-shooter-manifesto.html>; "El Paso Shooting Suspect Says Ak-style Gun Came from Romania," *AP News*, August 28, 2019, https://apnews.com/f519fb0254de409d93a751e4fa1f8e0b <https://apnews.com/f519fb0254de409d93a751e4fa1f8e0b>

2. Robert Moore and Mark Berman, "El Paso Suspect Said He Was Targeting 'Mexicans,' Told Officers He was the Shooter, Police Say," *Washington Post*, August 9, 2019,

https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/el-paso-suspect-said-he-was-targeting-mexicans-told-officers-he-was-the-shooter-police-say/2019/08/09/ab235e18-bac9-11e9-b3b4-2bb69e8c4e39_story.html < https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/el-paso-suspect-said-he-was-targeting-mexicans-told-officers-he-was-the-shooter-police-say/2019/08/09/ab235e18-bac9-11e9-b3b4-2bb69e8c4e39_story.html> .

3. Tom Dart, "'We are Texas Because of Guns': El Paso Carnage Unlikely to Dent State's Gun Culture," *Guardian*, August 9, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/09/el-paso-shooting-texas-guns < https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/09/el-paso-shooting-texas-guns> .

4. Travis DeShong, "Kacey Musgraves, the Rare Country Singer to Address Gun Control, Says 'Hold Your Politicians Accountable,'" *Washington Post*, August 5, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/08/05/kacey-musgraves-rare-country-singer-address-gun-control-says-hold-your-politicians-accountable/ < https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2019/08/05/kacey-musgraves-rare-country-singer-address-gun-control-says-hold-your-politicians-accountable/> .

5. Austin Sarat and Jonathan Obert, "What Both Sides Don't Get About American Gun Culture," *Politico*, August 4, 2019, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/08/04/mass-shooting-gun-culture-227502 < https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/08/04/mass-shooting-gun-culture-227502> .

6. David Yamane, "Broad (Not Deep) Thoughts on American Gun Culture," *Gun Culture 2.0*, August 7, 2019, https://gunculture2point0.wordpress.com/2019/08/07/broad-not-deep-thoughts-on-american-gun-culture/ < https://gunculture2point0.wordpress.com/2019/08/07/broad-not-deep-thoughts-on-american-gun-culture/> .

7. See Angela Stroud, *Good Guys With Guns: The Appeal and Consequences of Concealed Carry* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Jennifer Carlson, *Citizen-Protectors: The Everyday Politics of Guns in an Age of Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Harel Shapira, "Calvin's Problem: Racial Identity and Gun Ownership," *Public Culture* 29, no. 2 (2017): 221–226; and Lara Beth Nielsen, "Good Moms With Guns: Individual and Relational Rights in the Home, Family, and Society," in *Guns in Law*, ed. Austin Sarat, Lawrence Douglas, and Martha Merrill Umphrey (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019), 164–199.

8. Jonathan Obert, Andrew Poe, and Austin Sarat, "The Lives of Guns: An Introduction," *The Lives of Guns*, ed. Jonathan Obert, Andrew Poe, and Austin Sarat (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1. Obert, Poe, and Sarat's edited volume showcases the most current scholarship that examines the gun as an object with agency.

9. Bruno Latour, "On Technical Mediation—Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy," *Common Knowledge* 3, no. 2 (1994): 29–64.

10. For more on the capacious definition of "culture" we are employing, see Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections," in *Color Conscious: the Political Morality of Race* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 87. Appiah argues that "the notion that what has held the United States together historically over its great geographical range is a common culture, like the common culture of {a} traditional society is . . . not sociologically plausible." Nonetheless, Appiah suggests that such notions about US culture do often offer insights into a "dominant culture" that "included much of the common culture of the dominant classes." By interrogating the "common {gun} culture of the dominant classes" we hope to illuminate the structures of power that enable the plurality of gun cultures in the United States.

11. Our conception of a hegemonic gun culture that is co-constitutive with broader structures of racial and colonial power has much in common with Patrick Blanchfield's conception of "gunpower" as outlined in his forthcoming book *Gunpower* (New York: Verso Books, forthcoming 2020).

12. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 21; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Race and Globalization," in *Geographies of Global Change: Remapping the World*, ed. R.J. Johnston, Peter J. Taylor, and Michael J. Watts, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 261.

13. Inderpal Grewal, *Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in Twenty-First Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 190, 194.

14. The United States is awash with privately-owned firearms and, as a result, has exceptionally high rates of gun violence. According to the Centers for Disease Control, nearly 40,000 people died from firearm injuries in 2017—the highest number since 1968. Deaths by suicide account for 60 percent of those fatalities, and gun homicides make up 37 percent. Sarah Mervosh, "Nearly 40,000 People Died From Guns in U.S. Last Year, Highest in 50 Years," *New York Times*, December 18, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/us/gun-deaths.html < https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/18/us/gun-deaths.html> .

15. Grewal, *Saving the Security State*, 1.

16. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11.

17. Michael S. Schmidt and Richard Pérez-Peña, "F.B.I. Treating San Bernardino Attack as Terrorism Case," *The New York Times*,December 4, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/us/tashfeen-malik-islamic-state.html < https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/05/us/tashfeen-malik-islamic-state.html> ; Jane Coaston, "New Evidence Shows the Pulse Nightclub Shooting Wasn't About Anti-LGBTQ Hate," *Vox.com*, April 5, 2018, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/4/5/17202026/pulse-shooting-lgbtq-trump-terror-hate < https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/4/5/17202026/pulse-shooting-lgbtq-trump-terror-hate> ; Rukmini Callimachi, "Was Orlando Shooter Really Acting for ISIS? For ISIS, It's All the Same," *New York Times*, June 12, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/13/us/orlando-omar-mateen-isis.html < https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/13/us/orlando-omar-mateen-isis.html> .

18. For a roundup of studies contesting claims about guns and self defense, see "Gun Threats and Self-Defense Gun Use" *Harvard Injury Control Research Center* Accessed April 12 2020, https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/hicrc/firearms-research/gun-threats-and-self-defense-gun-use-2/ < https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/hicrc/firearms-research/gun-threats-and-self-defense-gun-use-2/> .

19. See Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam," *Martin Luther King , Jr. Research and Education Institute*, accessed September 8, 2019, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam < https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam> .

20. Richard Hofstadter, "America as a Gun Culture," *American Heritage* 21, no. 6 (1970), https://www.americanheritage.com/america-gun-culture < https://www.americanheritage.com/america-gun-culture> .

21. Hofstadter, "America as a Gun Culture."

22. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded: A Disarming History of the Second Amendment* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2018).

23. Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded*, 17.

24. Dunbar-Ortiz, *Loaded*, 14.

25. The National Rifle Association, accessed August 30, 2019, home.nra.org.

26. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995; Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), xxiii.

27. For more on the friend/enemy distinction see Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 26–27.

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Lindsay Livingston is a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Theater and Dance at Bowdoin College. Livingston's work investigates the intersections between performance, race, violence, and public space. Her current book project, *Extraordinary Violence: Performance, Race, and Gun Culture in the United States*, argues that gun culture in the United States is reflective of and conditioned by racialized performances of citizenship and public inclusion, both onstage and in everyday life.

View all of Lindsay Livingston's articles.

Alex Trimble Young

Alex Trimble Young is an Honors Faculty Fellow in Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona State University. Young is a scholar of transnational settler colonialism and United States literature and culture. His forthcoming book, *The Frontiers of Dissent: The Settler Colonial Imaginary in U.S. Literature after 1945*, focuses on how the oppositional literature in the contemporary U.S. has been shaped by the ongoing history of settler colonialism and Indigenous resistance.

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